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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 002313

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [ZI](#) [MDC](#)
SUBJECT: MASS ACTION IN THE OFFING?

REF: (A) HARARE 2287 (B) HARARE 2286 (C) HARARE 2279
(D) HARARE 2124 (E) HARARE 1594

Classified By: Political Officer Win Dayton under Section 1.5(b)(d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: MDC Secretary for Presidential Affairs Gandhi Mudzingwa on November 25 advised polloff that the opposition party was laying the groundwork for another "mass action" in late January or early February 2004. He predicted that the bishops would soon publicly declare their mediation efforts at a dead end, opening the door for the MDC to pursue mass action without being accused of undermining talks. In fact, the timing of mass action, imminent or not, likely will depend on a host of uncertain factors, including ruling party and international reaction to a withdrawal by the bishops, if indeed the bishops are yet prepared to declare their efforts a failure. END SUMMARY.

Civil Society Outreach

2. (C) Mudzingwa said he and other party leaders recently had met with senior representatives of the three organizations headed by the respective members of the "bishops troika" (ref B), although the bishops themselves were unavailable. Mudzingwa said that the consensus of church leaders represented was that the bishops' efforts had been unable to overcome the ruling party's disingenuousness about talks and that it was time to take a different tack. They agreed that the bishops should declare publicly that their best efforts had come to naught and that they would suspend further mediation work. Mudzingwa said the MDC expected the ruling party to respond ambivalently, evincing its bad faith to domestic and international audiences. That would permit the MDC to renew plans for mass action without taking the blame for sinking prospects for talks.

3. (C) According to Mudzingwa, the party already was engaging a number of players it deemed potentially crucial in maximizing the mass action's impact. He asserted that the churches could be counted on to help mobilize participants at the parish level. Various groups within civil society, including the increasingly restive labor unions would participate as well.

Problematic Security Forces

4. (C) Mudzingwa reported that the party also was reaching out to the police and military. The party had contacts in the police force, which he maintained could not ultimately be relied on by the ruling party, were popular action to be sufficiently massive. Communications with the military remained problematic but the party had made inroads. He said that at least one senior officer had indicated that the support or at least ambivalence of many top brass could be secured with promises that they could keep farms gained under land reform -- an approach party leadership was weighing. Mudzingwa said the party expected Mugabe to sweep away the entire top brass, replacing it with the next echelon that ostensibly had better rapport with the rank-and-file. He said this might appear popular in the short run but the new brass's allegiances to the ruling party may prove difficult to sustain. The party was considering public statements to augment discreet confidential personal approaches to certain officers, but recognized the risk of fueling ruling party insecurities and provoking a dangerous backlash. Echoing an earlier approach, he sought USG assistance in quietly bolstering the ZDF's confidence in the MDC (ref E).

5. (C) Mudzingwa said the party's next mass action would be more geographically dispersed than action earlier this year. A key tactical difference would be to engineer more action in rural areas, which he asserted would stretch thin GOZ resources -- especially the principally rural-based "Green Bombers" -- devoted to suppressing public dissent.

Comment

16. (C) The party's apparent consideration of renewed mass action responds to growing impatience among a restive rank-and-file. It further reflects a recognition that Mugabe's disingenuousness had been laid bare internationally by the failure of the bishops, Mbeki, and Obasanjo to find any purchase for talks. A leading advocate within the party's more militant wing, Mudzingwa is very close to Tsvangirai but the extent to which the party leadership

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supports imminent mass action is uncertain. Tsvangirai made no mention of it when he met with the Ambassador last week (ref A), although he made clear that convincing the world of Mugabe's bad faith -- presumably a political condition precedent to mass action -- is an MDC priority. We question how soon the bishops, who are engaging regional leaders on Zimbabwe (ref B), or Mbeki will be prepared to admit failure publicly. We suspect that a decision to proceed will await more definitive signals that the international community has given up on such efforts. We cannot discount the possibility that the ruling party could manipulate its posture on talks so as to further string out or rejuvenate mediation efforts.

17. (C) An additional factor constraining a decision to move forward is continued uncertainty about the MDC's ability to mobilize sufficient participation in the face of public apathy, hamstrung communication, severe economic crisis, and official intimidation. Recent efforts by the Zimbabwe Conference of Trade Unions (ref C) and the National Constituent Assembly (ref E) to engineer public demonstrations have elicited scant public participation. Anonymous e-mails calling people to the streets at specific times have provoked no reaction, other than from the GOZ in arresting several found in possession of such e-mails.

18. (C) Widespread despair and suffering precipitated by the country's economic implosion remain a wild card to some extent. Most Zimbabweans continue to respond to their plight by attending to the daily challenges of scraping by and by eschewing political action. If the public were to take to the streets in large number -- a big if, whether by political plan or in spontaneous reaction to an unforeseen provocation -- the government's ability to contain events is unclear. To date, civil disturbances have been fairly centralized affairs choreographed with plenty of notice. Police have had little trouble pre-empting or controlling such events and have been, since the violent reaction to the MDC's June mass action, relatively restrained in response -- roughing up a few demonstrators for show and releasing those arrested in short order. The key question remains: can public discontent be translated into large demonstrations or can the security forces continue to prevent any demonstration from gaining momentum. Confronted with larger and more dispersed crowds, the insecure and resource-strapped GOZ could be expected to unleash a wider and significantly more violent crackdown than Zimbabwe has seen in some time -- with unpredictable results.

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